A Learning Alberta

Increasing Accessibility to Advanced Education for Under-Represented Albertans

A Discussion Document

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A Learning Alberta

Alberta will be a province where all Albertans have access to higher learning opportunities. It will be a province that aggressively seizes the opportunities of the future by leveraging the skills, talents and imaginations of its citizens. And it will be a province that will enjoy even greater success in the century ahead thanks to a solid foundation and legacy of higher learning that we will create together.

Albertans will be inspired to reach their full potential through advanced learning - to move beyond where they are now to where they can be. But most of all, Alberta will become a true learning province, where advanced education and lifelong learning is the cornerstone of a healthy, prosperous and progressive society.

Dave Hancock, Riverbend Ragg-Times

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1 Introduction

1.1 The *A Learning Alberta* Context

Alberta's Minister of Advanced Education has initiated a comprehensive exercise to establish a new vision for the province's advanced education system. Through the *A Learning Alberta* initiative, a revised vision and new policy outcomes for Alberta's advanced education system will be articulated.

A key question of A *Learning Alberta* is how to ensure that opportunities are available to every Albertan to advance their education – to maximize their own potential as well as to contribute to their communities and the continued prosperity of the province now and in the future. To explore the issues impacting accessibility, information was gathered on policies and programs, and recent research and consultation reports were reviewed.[1] This paper discusses the multidimensional nature of access; describes learning pathways for youth; summarizes the advanced education system with a focus on foundation skills and basic upgrading; outlines the challenges faced by specific populations; suggests opportunities for increasing accessibility; and concludes with key questions for stakeholders.

This paper on accessibility is complemented by other a number of other discussion papers including ensuring affordability and investing in the advanced education system, and the opportunities and challenges facing advanced education in rural Alberta.

1.2 Process and Feedback

Individuals and groups interested in providing comments to this paper may submit responses no later than August 19, 2005 to:

Phil Gougeon
Assistant Deputy Minister
Alberta Advanced Education
7th Floor Commerce Place
10155 102nd Street
Edmonton, AB
T5J 4L5

Alternatively, submissions can be provided by e-mail to: alearning.alberta@gov.ab.ca.

Responses to this and the other papers will be reviewed by the *A Learning Alberta* steering committee established by the Minister to guide development of a new vision and

[1] The forums were hosted by the Minister of Advanced Education in January and February 2005 to seek input on how to improve Alberta's Advanced Learning System. One forum focused on the post-secondary system, one on Aboriginal concerns and one on community learning concerns.

policy outcomes for Alberta's advanced education system. It is anticipated that a preliminary vision and framework will be presented at a Minister's Forum, scheduled for Fall 2005.

1.3 Policy Context

The Government of Alberta's commitment to advanced education is evident through its twenty-year strategic plan, *Today's Opportunities, Tomorrow's Promise*. This plan envisions Alberta as a vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children. There are four pillars or areas of opportunity that support the realization of Alberta's vision: unleashing innovation; leading in learning; competing in a global marketplace; and making Alberta the best place to live, work and visit. An advanced education system accessible to Albertans is a key component of all four pillars, and by extension, a key component of the Government of Alberta's strategic vision.

Currently Alberta Advanced Education directly supports the achievement of the twenty-year strategic plan through strategies identified in its business plan. For instance, under the leading in learning pillar, business plan strategies include develop strategies to increase participation in learning opportunities by Aboriginal, immigrant, and other under-represented groups, and provide opportunities in local communities for adults including Aboriginal, immigrant and other underrepresented groups to return to learning to meet their personal learning and employment goals.

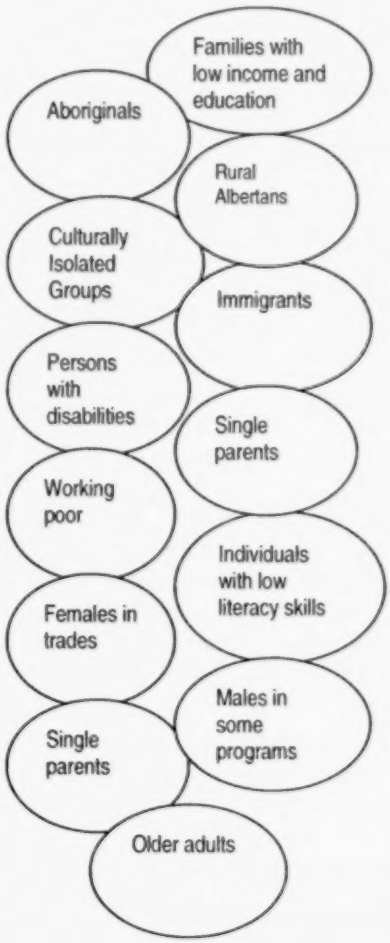
2 The Dimensions of Accessibility

Educational attainment is strongly associated with life chances and opportunities including employment, income, health and overall quality of life. However, many Albertans face complex and interrelated barriers to their participation in advanced education. While Alberta has one of the best education and advanced education systems in the world, certain groups of Albertans such as Aboriginal people, individuals whose parents have low income and/or low levels of education, rural Albertans, and persons with disabilities have lower post-secondary participation and educational attainment outcomes than other Albertans. As well, each year, Alberta welcomes new immigrants, some of whom arrive with limited formal education and the need for English language, literacy or other upgrading programs to enable them to participate and contribute to the economy.

The chart on the following page outlines a number of groups of learners that are currently underrepresented in advanced education and the key barriers to their participation.

Groups Under-Represented in Advanced Education and Their Key Barriers to Participation

Under-Represented Groups



KEY BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION*

LACK OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND AWARENESS of options, types of programs available, actual costs and sources of financial assistance

SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS
- Rural Albertans may be reluctant to leave their home communities and social supports
- Aspirations of potential learners
- Institution's culture and ability to accommodate the needs of different learners
- Lack of familiarity or feeling of "fit" in a post-secondary institution

PHYSICAL BARRIERS (of facilities) for persons with disabilities

GEOGRAPHIC AVAILABILITY
- Rural Albertans face additional economic barriers of relocating to attend advanced education
- Distance delivery methods may not be appropriate for the learner

GAPS IN SYSTEM and SUPPORTS from K-12 into and between the adult learning systems (Advanced Education and Human Resources & Employment)

COST – Tuition, text books, and living costs for individuals who are not eligible for Alberta Human Resources and Employment's Work Foundations program
- Childcare, transportation and other supports
- Cost of education compared to employment in a vibrant economy
- Assistance limits for learners with dependents

INSTITUTIONAL ADMISSION CRITERIA
- Lack of recognition of prior learning gained through life and work experiences
- Individuals may lack 1 or 2 courses or not have a high enough grade point average

AVAILABILITY - Existing programs have limited spaces

* Groups and barriers overlap, and are presented in random order

As is evident from the chart, the barriers to participation are multi-dimensional and complex, particularly for certain groups of learners.

Cost (actual and perceived) and space availability are central to ensuring accessibility. Costs may include tuition, text books, and living costs. Individuals from low income families who have to relocate to attend studies may face additional obstacles.

Accessibility is proposed as a core principle and policy objective guiding Alberta's student financial assistance and programs supporting learners.

> *Accessibility: all Albertans who are inspired to pursue advanced education have the support they require. Needs-based student financial assistance is available to ensure cost is not a barrier to those without financial means.*[2]

Without an adequate level of space not all qualified applicants gain admission to the program or institution of their choice, or admission criteria to popular programs are set to limit the numbers of applicants who might otherwise be eligible. The discussion paper *Investing in Alberta's Advanced Education System* also proposes an *accessibility* principle and policy objective to guide future government funding to institutions and other learning providers:

> *Investment mechanisms and policies should enable accessibility, such that all qualified Albertans who are inspired to pursue advanced education studies have the opportunity to do so. In this context, investment mechanisms and incentive structures should facilitate higher levels of participation and educational attainment, particularly among under-represented Albertans.*[3]

However, addressing the financial costs to the learner along with increasing investment to add more learning spaces will not be sufficient to increase participation among under-represented populations. Two additional proposed *affordability* principles and policy objectives are also important to increasing participation of under-represented learners.

> *Responsiveness: student financial assistance and affordability supports will evolve to meet the changing needs of learners and respond to a diverse student population.*
>
> *Flexibility: Alberta's affordability programs do not operate in isolation from other social and economic public policy activities. Policies and programs in different provincial departments and other jurisdictions should complement and*

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[2] Alberta Advanced Education, *A Learning Alberta: Ensuring Affordability in Alberta's Advanced Education System*, June 2005, p. 3-4.

[3] Alberta Advanced Education, *A Learning Alberta: Investing in Alberta's Advanced Education System*, June 2005, p. 4.

> support each other. Affordability programs will respond to a wide and growing range of learner needs and ensure a level of equity across different populations.[4]

The objective of *responsiveness* recognizes that not all students are under the age of 24, studying full-time, and supported by their parents. Learners are increasingly older, studying part-time with family and work commitments. The objective of *flexibility* acknowledges that the issues impacting accessibility are complex and multidimensional. Successful participation in advanced education of disadvantaged groups will require working in concert with other government policies and programs. For example, there are 11 ministries within the Alberta government that administer 34 different programs for persons with disabilities.

The concept of access for *inspired and qualified* Albertans is problematic for many disadvantaged groups. Policy and programs for increasing access for these groups will need to address both their aspirations and their qualifications. Individuals whose parents have lower levels of education and income tend to not view further studies as a viable option. Cultural factors also play a role, whether this is the result of earlier negative experiences with formal education or unfamiliarity with institutional settings. This means that potentially qualified students may not aspire to advanced education because of a perception of lack of fit. It may also mean that for a variety of reasons, poor achievement and/or engagement at the K-12 level has resulted in individuals who do not meet the admission criteria for post-secondary education.

Increased access will require taking into account different ages/life stages and academic background/skills of potential learners. Specifically, initiatives must respond to the varied circumstances of:

- Youth who left the K-12 system prior to completing high school. Their academic skills range from limited literacy to those that are lacking one or two credits for high school completion.
- Youth who completed high school but for a variety of reasons did not go on to post-secondary studies.
- Adults over the age of 25 who have limited foundation skills in literacy or proficiency in English, and who may have had negative experiences with schooling.
- Adults who completed high school.
- Immigrants to Alberta with post-secondary credentials earned outside Canada.

The latter three populations of adults have significant life/and or work experiences and are likely to have multiple family, community and work obligations.

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[4] Alberta Advanced Education, *A Learning Alberta: Ensuring Affordability in Alberta's Advanced Education System*, June 2005, p. 4.

The next section describes the pathways for youth from high school to post-secondary education and/or employment. This is followed by a description of the advanced education system focusing on foundation skills and basic upgrading options for adults with limited academic backgrounds.

3 Learner Transitions and Pathways from K-12

Much of the post-secondary education system is designed for youth who exit directly from high school and immediately pursue further education. However, not all youth complete high school, and not all high school graduates continue their studies. For the 2000-01 Grade 10 entry cohort in Alberta, 65% completed high school on time, and an additional 10% completed within 2 more years. Twenty-five percent of Alberta high school students do not complete Grade 12.[5]

Completion of high school is the minimum standard for successful labour market entry, continued employability, and the ability to perform daily literacy activities. Non-completers are most likely to have low literacy skills, and are therefore, more likely to face difficulties in finding and maintaining employment. Furthermore, they are much less likely to be offered opportunities to participate in further education and learning throughout life. As they tend to be in jobs that require fewer literacy skills, their literacy skills can deteriorate over time.[6] The commitment to improving high school completion rates is clear in the *Report and Recommendations of Alberta's Commission on Learning* and Alberta Education's Business Plan.

Although 75% completed high school within 2 years, only 51% of the Grade 10 entry cohort made the transition into post-secondary (including apprenticeship) within 6 years.[7] So, 24% of high school completers did not go to post-secondary within 2 years of completing high school. This is partially due to Alberta's strong economy with the availability of relatively high-wage employment. Non-completers may choose to enter an upgrading or preparatory program to complete their high school. The tuition costs for upgrading must be borne by the learner, as a low-income individual must be out of the K-12 system a minimum of 12-months before being eligible for assistance through Alberta Human Resources and Employment's Skills Investment Strategy.

More information regarding high school completion and the transition to advanced education studies can be found in *Profile of Alberta's Advanced Education System.*

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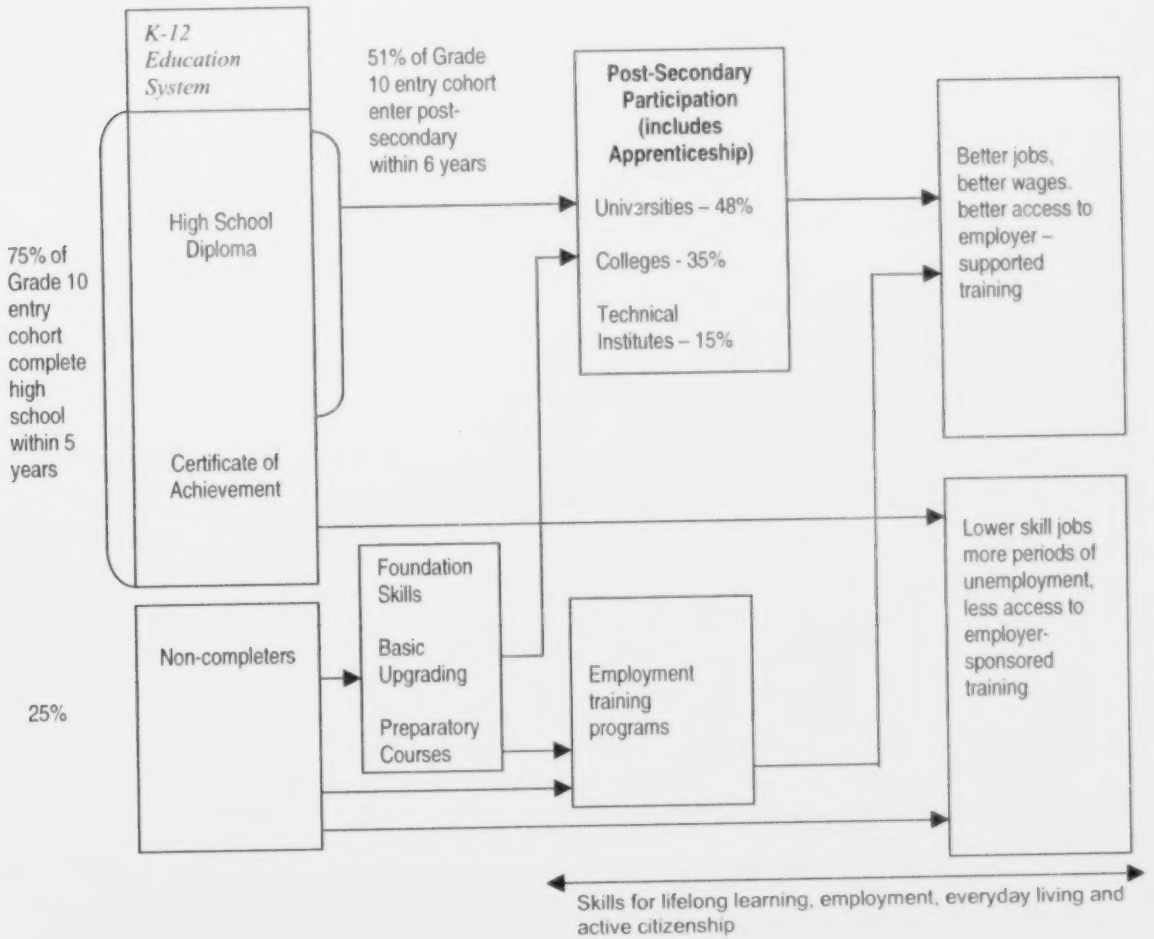
[5] Alberta Advanced Education, *Profile of Alberta's Advanced Education System*, June 2005, p. 6-11.
[6] Statistics Canada, *Education Matters: Literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills – Foundation skills for a knowledge-based economy*, June 2005 (81-004-XIE).
[7] Alberta Advanced Education, *Profile of Alberta's Advanced Education System*, June 2005, p. 6-11.

The following diagram illustrates pathways for youth exiting from the K-12 system to post-secondary education and/or employment.

High School→Post-Secondary→Employment Pathways


K-12 Education System
51% of Grade 10 entry cohort enter post-secondary within 6 years
Post-Secondary Participation (includes Apprenticeship)
Universities – 48%
Colleges - 35%
Technical Institutes – 15%
Better jobs, better wages, better access to employer – supported training
75% of Grade 10 entry cohort complete high school within 5 years
High School Diploma
Certificate of Achievement
Lower skill jobs more periods of unemployment, less access to employer-sponsored training
Foundation Skills
Basic Upgrading
Preparatory Courses
Employment training programs
Non-completers
25%
Skills for lifelong learning, employment, everyday living and active citizenship

Although this diagram shows linear pathways from high school to work or advanced education, the experiences of young people is not necessarily a straight line from high school. Young people move in and out of advanced education and from low-skilled and part-time work to more secure employment. Many work part-time while still attending school and continue to participate in education while working full-time. Some then leave the labour market to return to school.

(*Every child learns, Every child succeeds. Report and recommendations of Alberta's Commission on Learning*, October 2003, p. 59)

The need to promote a variety of diverse learning pathways including increased vocational options has been recommended as a means of encouraging low-income students to choose post-secondary education.[8] Alberta Education has already moved in this direction through offering increased options such as Career and Technology Studies (CTS); Integrated Occupational Program (IOP) which integrates knowledge and employability courses; Work Experience and Green Certificate programs that allow students to earn credits while gaining on-the-job experience; Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP); Youth Apprenticeship Program; and the Learner Pathways initiative.

According to the report, *Ready or Not? Literacy Skills and Post-Secondary Education*,[9] the decision on whether or not a young person will further their studies is affected by several factors including their literacy skills and high school credentials, the extent to which they are engaged in school, the support available from family, friends and other people in their social network, and their financial means. Youth who did not transition to post-secondary may have other goals that take them directly to employment, entrepreneurial endeavours or travel. However, the report described three groups of youth where there is a potential to increase their participation.

1. Youth who were motivated to attend post-secondary but who did not meet the admission criteria – their grade point average was too low or they were missing prerequisites to enter the program or institution of their choice.

2. Youth with average to above-average academic skills who do not attend post-secondary education because they have a low sense of belonging or low participation in school-related activities. "Negative" attitudes about schooling were considerably greater in boys than girls. This is evident in the lower enrolment rates for males than females, which is a trend nationally as well as in Alberta.

   The study authors suggested that this second group could be targeted in efforts to increase post-secondary participation through interventions in grades 9 and 10. These interventions could include counseling on alternative career paths; information about the financial benefits and personal returns of various forms of post-secondary education; and information on the financial supports and assistance available.

   With assistance provided by Alberta Education and by Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Alberta Advanced Education leads a *Raising Awareness about Planning for Post-Secondary Studies* initiative to increase awareness about planning for post-secondary studies earlier in the family life cycle. This initiative includes strategies to assist students, parents, teachers, school counselors and administrators; however, the work could be expanded to involve a broader range of partners such as Alberta Children's Services and agencies serving families. Examples of work

[8] Canadian Policy Research Networks, *Getting There and Staying There: Low Income Students and Post-Secondary Education*, March 2005.
[9] J. Douglas Wilms and Patrick Flanagan, *Ready or Not? Literacy Skills and Post-Secondary Education*, September 2003.

accomplished to date include "Learning Clicks" an information CD for grades 9-12 students supported by a Youth Ambassador Program and "Transition Kits" for students in grades 9 and 12 and for parents of students in grades 6, 9 and 12. Alberta Human Resources and Employment staff visit high schools to provide career counseling and labour market information.

3. Youth who have marginal academic skills who would benefit from upgrading in Grades 11 and 12 so that they gain the necessary reading and writing and mathematics skills required for post-secondary education. The study authors suggested that this third group could be successful in post-secondary studies with this intervention.

The next section will describe the advanced education system and opportunities for adults to gain foundation skills and basic upgrading.

4 Alberta's Advanced Education System

For the purposes of this paper, the terms "advanced education system, studies or opportunities" are used interchangeably to refer generally to an adult education or learning system that encompasses three broad categories of programming:

- foundation skills and basic upgrading programs;
- credentialed post-secondary education programs; and
- continuing education including general interest courses.

Each category addresses distinct learner needs and learning objectives, and each has a range of different issues affecting accessibility. Ensuring accessibility to all three components of advanced education is important, however, access to foundation skills programming is critical to increase social inclusion and reduce socio-economic divisions. Literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs create the foundation for further learning, enhance participation in the labour force and enable individuals to be active citizens.

4.1 Foundation Skills and Basic Upgrading Programs

Foundation Skills and basic upgrading programs are typically non-credit and do not contribute to a certificate, diploma or degree, but provide basic foundation skills for every day activities and/or prepare individuals for further education or post-secondary education programs. Most provinces in Canada have a policy framework for Adult Basic Education and Adult Literacy to assist an adult learner with the pathways from basic literacy to other components of the advanced education system.

Alberta Human Resources and Employment uses the following descriptors – literacy - grades 1-6, Adult Basic Education – grades 7-9, and Academic Upgrading – grades 10-12. Also included as a foundation skill is ESL. ESL learners include Aboriginals, Francophone Canadians, individuals with hearing impairment, and immigrants. Many

adults in these programs may not have completed Grade 12. Some have completed high school but may lack the specific prerequisite courses or grade point average to get into the post-secondary program of their choice.

Part-time adult literacy (to a grade 9 level of competency) tutoring or courses and ESL courses are offered by Community Adult Learning Councils. Grants are provided by Alberta Advanced Education's Community Programs branch to provide local access to tuition-free or low-cost programs. The Community Adult Learning Policy states that Community Adult Learning Councils must have local procedures in place to ensure that the cost of tuition is not a barrier to access. Grants are also provided to community organizations to provide volunteer tutors to adults who want to improve their basic literacy skills and to offer intergenerational literacy programs for parents and their preschool children. Programs must be tuition-free, and in some cases provide transportation and on-site child-minding services.

Post-secondary institutions also offer foundation skills (literacy and ESL), basic upgrading and preparatory courses on a cost-recovery basis. Assistance is available from Alberta Human Resources and Employment for individuals who need to acquire ESL or grades 4-12 to pursue further job related training and/or to find a job and substantially improve their employment situation. Individuals must be out of the K-12 system a minimum of 12 months and demonstrate financial need to be eligible. In special circumstances, support may be provided for individuals needing to acquire grades 1-3. Each year Alberta Human Resources and Employment expends several million dollars for tuition, text books, transportation, and living allowances for learners in these programs.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada also funds post-secondary institutions, school boards, private training organizations and not-for-profit community organizations to provide tuition-free ESL courses for adult immigrants who are newly arrived in Canada. These courses can be full or part-time and do not lead to a credential.

4.2 Credentialed Post-Secondary Education Programs

These programs are offered by post-secondary institutions - universities, colleges and technical institutes and lead to a credential including certificates (skill training, apprenticeship and career), diplomas, applied degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees and earned doctorates.[10] The majority of learners in credentialed post-secondary programs would have completed Grade 12.

[10] Information on credentials awarded by sector in Alberta can be found in Alberta Advanced Education, *Profile of Alberta's Advanced Education System*, June 2005, p. 38-44.

4.3 Continuing Education Including General Interest Courses

Continuing education including general interest courses is an important component of a learning culture. These courses are typically non-credit, part-time courses or short duration seminars or workshops offered by community organizations, Community Adult Learning Councils, private companies, school boards and post-secondary institutions to respond to learners' desires to improve their employability, for personal growth or leisure. Advanced Education provides grants to 83 Community Adult Learning Councils to provide part-time learning opportunities to enhance employability and to address topics identified as priorities by local communities. Other than this support, general-interest courses for Albertans are provided on a cost-recovery basis.

5 Specific Populations

Although the following sections highlight the challenges identified for specific populations, it is recognized that many learners face multiple barriers. For example, Aboriginal people are disproportionately represented in rural communities as are those Albertans with lower socio-economic status.

5.1 Aboriginal People

All levels of government are committed to increasing the educational outcomes for Aboriginal people. According to the 2001 Canada Census, 48% of Aboriginal people in Alberta aged 15 and over have less than high school education compared to 30% for non-Aboriginal Albertans.[11] The Government of Alberta's *Aboriginal Policy Framework* recognized that the significant socio-economic disparities between Aboriginal people and other Albertans must be addressed, and increasing both high school and advanced education completion rates were important components.[12]

Alberta Education and Alberta Advanced Education (then Alberta Learning) undertook an extensive public consultation process that led to the development of the *First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) Education Policy Framework*.[13] Goal 3 in the Education Policy Framework aims to have learners well-prepared for participation in post-secondary studies. The importance of achieving this goal and related strategies was reinforced in the report of Alberta's Commission on Learning.[14]

Improving access and learning and employment outcomes for Aboriginal people are important strategies in ministry business plans. Some examples of activities follow.

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[11] Statistics Canada, special tabulation for Alberta Advanced Education.

[12] Government of Alberta, *Strengthening Relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal Policy Framework*, 2000, p. 2.

[13] Alberta Learning, *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, February 2002.

[14] Alberta Learning, *Every child learns, Every child succeeds. Report and recommendations of Alberta's Commission on Learning*, October 2003. p. 81-89.

Alberta Education provided additional funding to school boards for support services including home-school liaison workers, increased services for at-risk children, and in-school cultural supports.

The Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project has facilitated apprenticeships for over 150 Aboriginal people in three northern communities. The program was recently expanded to the Calgary and Lethbridge areas. Alberta Advanced Education's Parent-Child Literacy Strategy is funding Aboriginal organizations to provide family literacy programs. The University of Alberta's Aboriginal Teacher Education Program has students enrolled at various campuses of Northern Lakes College. Additional Aboriginal students are enrolled in the Niipsotapi teacher education program, a collaboration of the University of Lethbridge and Red Crow Community College.

Alberta Human Resources and Employment is working with the federal government in developing and implementing a new learner benefit policy for First Nations wishing to access adult upgrading and short-term skill training programs. This ministry has also developed the First Nations training to employment program which prepares Aboriginal people for employment in various high demand areas.

Participants at the *Listening to Aboriginal Concerns* forum raised a number of issues, including:

- Provide adequate resources to implement the Alberta Commission on Learning's recommendations on Aboriginal education and the *FNMI Education Policy Framework.*
- Understand the diversity within the Aboriginal population.
- Make real efforts to build cultural awareness and understanding throughout Alberta society and particularly in educational institutions.
- Work with Aboriginal communities to build leadership, solutions and strategies.
- Acknowledge that Aboriginal learners may be single mothers supporting extended families
- Create systems for recognizing skills gained through non-formal means
- Streamlining and coordinating the policies and programs of different governments and government departments.[15]

5.2 Families with Low Income and Low Education Levels

Most studies confirm that the parental education level and income are the most important factors in determining participation in advanced education. Individuals with lower socio-economic status are less likely to participate in advanced education than those with higher income and educational attainment, with variations by sector. For example,

[15] Advanced Education, *A Window of Opportunity: Listening to Aboriginal Concerns*, held February 15, 2005.

Statistics Canada data shows similar rates of college participation between students from the lowest and the highest quartile of family income, however, a 19.9% percentage gap in university participation.[16]

The 2003 Post-secondary Education Participation Survey of youth aged 18-24 confirmed that children from families with lower incomes did not enroll in advanced education to the same extent as those from higher income families. There was a 30% participation gap between children in families with gross incomes of less than $30,000 and those with gross incomes of $80,000 and higher.[17] Other studies suggest that parental education is more important than family income in determining post-secondary participation.[18]

The important role that parents play in promoting learning in their children is the basis for Alberta Advanced Education's Parent-Child Literacy Strategy. The strategy supports intergenerational literacy programs for socio-economically disadvantaged families with children from newborn to age six. It recognizes that parents are prepared to return to learning to improve their own literacy skills because they want the best start for their children.

5.3 Rural Albertans

Rural Albertans[19] are a key population under-represented at almost all levels of Alberta's advanced education system. A number of challenges face potential rural learners including issues of geography, economic circumstances and availability of socio-cultural resources. Although distance from learning institutions poses both geographic and financial barriers for rural Albertans, research suggests that socio-economic and cultural obstacles, such as parents with lower levels of education and lack of familiarity with the advanced education system, have a far greater impact on access and participation. Rural students are far less likely than urban students to have at least one parent with a post-secondary education (37% rural versus 50% urban).

Although certain primary industries are becoming more knowledge driven, many youth opt to work in times of economic expansion particularly in high wage industries associated with natural resources. In some cases, the return on investment for attaining a post-secondary education does not seem to outweigh the more immediate benefits of employment, especially to the debt adverse. However, the high concentration of primary employment as main economic drivers in rural Alberta also poses challenges. Primary industry is vulnerable to commodity price fluctuations and is susceptible to market

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[16] Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, January 9, 2002, p. 2.

[17] Statistics Canada, *Access, persistence and financing: First results from the Post-Secondary Education Participation Survey*, 2003. p. 18.

[18] *Getting There and Staying There: Low Income Students and Post-Secondary Education*, Canadian Policy Research Network, 2005.

[19] See also Alberta Advanced Education, *A Learning Alberta, Advanced Education in Rural Alberta: Challenges and Opportunities, A Discussion Document*, June 2005.

volatility. This often leaves individuals without post-secondary education in a vulnerable position with few transferable skills.

A Place to Grow – Alberta's Rural Development Strategy[20] identifies a number of priority actions to expand learning and skill development opportunities. Alberta has significant infrastructure in place to increase access to learning in rural communities, including Community Consortia, Community Adult Learning Councils and volunteer tutor adult literacy programs and Alberta-North which maintains a network of 50 Community Access Points.

Other supporting initiatives include the "NAIT in Motion" mobile trailers, which bring pre-trades training and apprenticeship training to rural locations (particularly Aboriginal communities), as well as financial assistance products specific to northern residents. These student financial assistance products include the Northern Alberta Student Supplement to assist low-income students in their first year of post-secondary education, the Northern Alberta Development Bursary to increase the number of trained professionals, and the Northern Alberta Development Council Bursary for Medical Students.

Participants at the *Listening to Community Learning Concerns* forum noted the importance of understanding the additional challenges faced by residents from small centres moving to post-secondary institutions in larger centres. They also suggested that opportunities in rural Alberta could be enhanced by providing adequate resources to and expanding Community Adult Learning Councils, and looking at bridging supports and blended learning opportunities that combined trades and literacy programs in rural communities.[21]

5.4 Persons with Disabilities

Only 36% of persons with disabilities receive a post-secondary education compared to 51% of the general population. It is estimated that one in six Albertans live with a disability that impacts their ability to fully participate in learning and work.

Spurred by the Alberta Human Rights Commission's *Duty to Accommodate Interpretive Bulletin*, a review of policies, programs and support services for learners with disabilities in post-secondary education was recently completed.[22] Included in this population are persons with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, or mental health and psychiatric disabilities.

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[20] Government of Alberta, *A Place to Grow – Alberta's Rural Development Strategy*, February 2005.
[21] Advanced Education, *A Window of Opportunity: Listening to Community Learning Concerns*, held February 15, 2005.
[22] Debra Russell and Robin Demko, *The Future Starts with You - Accommodating Learners with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education in Alberta: A Review of Policies, Programs, and Support Services*, May 2005.

Learners with disabilities identified many barriers to their participation in advanced education. The barriers include complex funding and administrative hurdles; institutional admission criteria; the challenges of transitioning from K-12 to advanced education; inadequate housing and lack of reliable accessible transportation; and the lack of alternative instructional formats and professional services while attending advanced education.

The report made a number of specific recommendations to post-secondary institutions, government and the K-12 system. The following common themes were identified by learners and post-secondary institutions:

- Poor transitioning from high school to post-secondary studies.
- Fragmented and uncoordinated funding, policies, programs and services.
- Lack of assistive technology specialists who can assess students' needs and train students on their use.
- Inconsistent quality of psycho-educational assessments and lack of psychologists qualified to do adult assessments.
- Insufficient resources in post-secondary institutions to support the increased student numbers and increased complexity of student needs.

5.5 Adults with Limited Literacy Skills

Literacy skills are critical for citizens to function in the new economy. The International Adult Literacy Survey (1994) and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (2002) were designed to measure a continuum of functional literacy skills in understanding and reading texts; locating and using information in formats such as maps, tables and charts; and performing mathematical functions. The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey confirmed the importance of education. Early school leavers are most likely to score at the lowest literacy levels, compared to those who stayed in school. Youth and young adults aged 16-35 with more years of post-secondary education consistently scored higher than those with fewer or no years of post-secondary education.

Adults with poor foundation skills are still not being reached by organized forms of adult education and training. The results of both surveys confirm that many adults have difficulties coping with literacy and numeracy related demands that are common in life and work. The 1994 results found that just over a third (36%) of adult Albertans do not have the basic literacy skills required for Canada's knowledge-based society. The results of the 2002 survey showed that almost a decade later the mean literacy levels for Canadians were virtually unchanged.[23] These results have profound consequences at both the individual and societal level. Twenty-six percent of Canadians with the lowest literacy skills are unemployed compared to only 4% of those with high skills.

[23] Alberta and other provincial results will be available in November 2005.

The significant differences in participation patterns among countries appear to indicate that differences in adult learning policies matter.[24] The study also confirmed the importance of family socio-economic background as measured by parent's level of education, on the literacy scores of young adults. Of particular concern was an apparent decline in the literacy levels of 16-25 year olds from families with lower socio-economic backgrounds.[25]

The section on Foundation Skills and Basic Upgrading Programs (refer to Section 4.1) provides an overview of the programs available in Alberta.

Participants at *A Window of Opportunity: Listening to Community Learning Concerns* said that the advanced education system could be improved for literacy learners by: developing a Government of Alberta literacy strategy; looking at ways to reduce the stigma that many attach to attending adult literacy programs; funding more family-centered programs and programs that respond to the needs of people at different ages; and creating a literacy endowment fund that would increase funding to literacy programs.[26]

5.6 Immigrants

Each year, between 14,000 and 16,000 new immigrants move to Alberta. Recent immigrants to Alberta are a diverse group that includes skilled immigrants with post-secondary credentials to refugees with little if any formal education. From 2001 to 2004, Alberta received 31,429 immigrants with post-secondary education; over 5,000 had master's or doctoral degrees. Despite their years of education, the majority come from countries where English is not the predominant language.[27] Alberta research found that about half of the immigrants with post-secondary credentials were not able to practice their profession or trade in Alberta.[28] The reasons for this are complex and include barriers related to advanced education, specifically, assessments of educational credentials, English language proficiency, work experience, professional theory and practice competencies. Specific actions such as supporting the development of assessment capacity and increasing accessibility to bridging programs were identified in the Government of Alberta strategy *Integrating Skilled Immigrants into the Alberta Economy*.[29] The need for these programs and services was reinforced in the recent

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[24] Statistics Canada and the OECD, *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, 2005, p. 81.
[25] Ibid, p. 227.
[26] Advanced Education, *A Window of Opportunity: Listening to Community Learning Concerns*, held February 15, 2005.
[27] Alberta Advanced Education, Tabulations from Citizenship and Immigration Canada Immigrant Landings Micro Data.
[28] Bradley Wells for Alberta Learning, *Foreign-trained Professionals and Tradespeople in Alberta: Challenges and Opportunities*, 2002.
[29] Government of Alberta, *Integrating Skilled Immigrants into the Alberta Economy*, September 2004.

review of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) in Alberta.[30] The review also identified the need to have an Alberta standard to measure and recognize English language proficiency. Both Alberta Advanced Education and Alberta Human Resources and Employment are providing or funding a number programs and services to accelerate labour market entry for skilled immigrants.

Access to English as a Second Language (ESL) programming is a key to enabling immigrants to participate and contribute to life in Alberta. The support for adult ESL programs was described earlier in the section on Foundation Skills and Basic Upgrading Programs (refer to Section 4.1). There are increasing numbers of immigrants coming to Alberta with low levels of English language proficiency and low levels of literacy. From 2001 to 2004, Alberta received 6,071 adult immigrants who had less than 10 years of formal education. ESL literacy learners have special needs and challenges that are not currently being met. Many of these individuals came to Canada as refugees, may not have literacy as their first language, and may have other barriers.

In addition to gaps in services to ESL literacy learners, the recent ESL review also identified gaps in programming for immigrant youth. Individuals who immigrate to Canada as youth may not have sufficient time or support to advance to an acceptable level of English language literacy to complete high school before they reach 20. Research at a Calgary high school of 232 ESL students over a five-year period found that they took an average of 4.5 years to complete the three-year high school program. Fifty percent of students who entered with an advanced level of English did not complete high school.[31]

When students reach the age of 20 they have to exit the K-12 system regardless of their level of literacy. However, the lack of trust in authority figures, lack of familiarity with the post-secondary environment, and the perceived or actual costs of tuition and text books may also pose significant barriers preventing their transition to an ESL literacy program at a post-secondary institution.[32] To address this, a number of reports have recommended additional ESL and literacy programming to create a bridge for these youth to advanced education or employment.[33]

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[30] Springboard Consulting for Alberta Advanced Education, Human Resources and Employment and Education, *A Review of Adult ESL in Alberta*, April 2005.

[31] David Watt and Hetty Roessingh, *Some you win, most you lose: Tracking ESL Student Drop Out in High School*, English Quarterly, vol. 26, No. 3, 1994.

[32] Bow Valley College, *Effective Post High School Programming: Evaluating the Needs of Immigrant Youth with Literacy Issues*, October 2003.

[33] Springboard Consulting for Alberta Advanced Education, Human Resources and Employment and Education, *A Review of Adult ESL in Alberta*, April 2005, p. 9.

6 Opportunities

Recent consultations and research have identified a number of opportunities that build on existing initiatives of Alberta Advanced Education and other Alberta government ministries. These opportunities are grouped in six broad overlapping themes with the following three objectives:

Inspiring learning through increased awareness, information and counseling for those who do not see further study as a viable option.

Increasing accessibility through enhancing learner pathways for youth, recognizing and valuing learning for adults, as well as increasing coordination, financial assistance and support services for specific learner groups.

Enabling learner success through targeted funding to post-secondary institutions and community-based learning providers to increase required learning supports, and increased local access built on strong partnerships with community, business and industry.

6.1 Expand Public Awareness, Information and Counseling

Build on existing activities of Education, Advanced Education and Human Resources and Employment to expand the information and counseling available to increase the numbers of Albertans who aspire to advanced education and have information on the costs and steps to get there. For example:

- A broad public awareness strategy promoting the value of advanced education and the value of foundation skills to counteract the stigma attached to adult literacy learning. Information and awareness designed to reach specific groups such as young parents, Aboriginal people, rural residents and males.
- More information and career development advice and counseling throughout the K-12 system, and for specific populations on the costs and benefits of advanced education; financial assistance and other options available, as well as career choices and learner pathways.

6.2 Enhance Learner Pathways

Increase the relevance and engagement of youth in school through enhancing the variety of learner pathways into advanced education and employment. Opportunities exist to build on the cross-ministry Learner Pathways initiative or Career and Technology Studies. Recent consultations and research suggested the need to develop and fund integrated programs that bridge young adults with limited literacy skills from the K-12 system to adult literacy programs and employment training programs.

6.3 Increase Coordination

Increased cross-ministry co-operation and funding, and increased co-ordination at the community level focused on the needs of the learner to ensure that learners have clear pathways and can make smooth transitions between the K-12 system, post-secondary education, and employment. For instance:

- Develop a cross-ministry foundation skills and basic upgrading strategy for Alberta. A comprehensive strategy must ensure that learners will not fall through jurisdictional gaps, and will have the added benefit of sending a signal that these programs are a critical and valued component of the advanced education system. The strategy should include prior learning assessment and recognition as a key pillar.
- Develop a cross-ministry initiative to improve transitions for students with disabilities from grades 10-12 to post-secondary programs and the workplace. The initiative would ensure that supports including appropriate educational assessments, counseling and assistive technologies are in place to allow learners with disabilities to transition to post-secondary programs and employment.

6.4 Value and Recognize Skills

Develop incentives and protocols that support prior learning assessment and recognition, portability, credit transfer arrangements and articulation agreements so that adults can "ladder' and build on existing skills and do not have to redo learning they have already acquired.

Valuing learning gained outside the formal learning environment acknowledges that many players are involved in the delivery of advanced education and that learning can take place any where and in a variety of ways. Recognizing prior skills enables adults to transition from one learning context to another, and provides adults with tangible evidence that they have achieved their learning goals. Opportunities exist to build on the work of the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers and post-secondary institutions on prior learning assessment and recognition and credit transfer in post-secondary institutions. For example:

- Work with post-secondary institutions to develop a province-wide standard for prior learning assessment and recognition, and fund its implementation.
- Work with post-secondary institutions, community-based and other providers to develop provincial standards and tools to describe and measure adult literacy and basic upgrading levels.
- Work with ESL providers to recognize and adopt Canadian Language Benchmarks as the standard to measure and describe English language proficiency for adult ESL programs in Alberta.

6.5 Increase Financial Assistance and Supports for Under-Represented Groups

Increase flexibility in student funding to increase options for part-time studies, and learners with dependents. Develop criteria under the Access to the Future Fund to provide funding to support increased access for under-represented groups, and to create funding designed to meet the needs of specific groups. For instance:

- Provide targeted funding to post-secondary institutions and community-based learning providers to improve their capacity at an institutional level and in the classroom to respond to the diverse learning needs and styles of learners. This should

include professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to increase cultural awareness and cross-cultural competencies.

- Fund mentorship programs where mentors provide social and emotional support, advice and help mediate cultural differences for the learner.
- For Learners with Disabilities - Commit resources to post-secondary institutions to bolster disability student support services; provide a centralized provincial service to coordinate and provide the production of student resource materials in alternative formats (similar to the service available from Alberta Education); and increase financial support options.
- For Aboriginal People - Implement initiatives under the FNMI Education Policy Framework and create financial assistance programs designed for Aboriginal students.
- For Immigrants - Support the development of assessment capacity and increase funding for bridging programs to accelerate the credentialing requirements for skilled immigrants.
- For Women and Men - Pursue initiatives to encourage women and men to enter programs where they are traditionally underrepresented (for example, higher female enrolments in apprenticeship programs and higher male enrolments in social sciences and humanities).

6.6 Increase Local Access and Community and Employer Partnerships

Develop criteria under the Access to the Future Fund to provide funding to support locally-based learning-community-employer partnerships. Some ideas that could be further explored include:

- Engage a broad group of citizens, employers and industry in local communities with post-secondary institutions, Community Adult Learning Councils and school boards to develop regional adult learning access plans.
- Explore the adaptation of components of the Manitoba Adult Learning Centre model for delivering of credit adult basic education with bridging to post-secondary credits.
- Provide incentives to encourage rural school jurisdictions, Community Adult Learning Councils, literacy programs, post-secondary institutions and employers to partner together to create lifelong learning centres that provide family-centered intergenerational programs.
- Expand, where feasible, mobile delivery and distance delivery of apprenticeship technical training in rural communities.

7 Conclusion

Increasing the participation of disadvantaged and under-represented Albertans in advanced education will require addressing a broad range of interrelated challenges that range from the intangible barriers of attitudes and perceptions to the more tangible barrier of costs. While there are opportunities to increase participation of the traditional 18-24 year old post-secondary entry cohort, policies and programs need to recognize that many

potential learners are older adults with family and work commitments, who also have a wealth of knowledge and skills gained outside of a classroom. It also means increasing participation for the significant numbers of Albertans with limited literacy and academic skills, and Albertans who have basic survival issues that make it difficult for them to accomplish their learning goals.

8 Key Questions

The purpose of this paper was to stimulate discussion and obtain stakeholder feedback on how to align the advanced education system to increase the participation of under-represented and disadvantaged Albertans. The following key questions will help guide written submissions.

1. Given the diversity of needs in under-represented groups, and their multiple challenges, what principles should be used as a framework to guide the development of policies and programs to meet their needs?
2. Have the major challenges and barriers to participation been identified? What issues are most critical?
3. How can the advanced education system be reconfigured to address these critical issues?
4. Recent research and consultations have suggested some opportunities for increasing access, do you agree or disagree with these? What do you see as opportunities for increasing access? What opportunities should be the priorities over the next three years?
5. How can we enhance co-ordination among other levels of government, other provincial ministries, learning providers, community and business to effectively meet learner needs?